Interview with Walter Roberts

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Information Series

WALTER ROBERTS

Interviewed by: Cliff Groce

Initial interview date: September 10, 1990

1942: Entry Into U.S. Government Information Work Office Of Coordinator Of Information (COI)

Q: Walter, what were the circumstances of your joining the International information program?

ROBERTS: In 1941, I had a position as research assistant at Harvard Law School, and if my memory serves me well, shortly after the outbreak of the war—meaning, of course, the United States entering the war on December 7, 1941—I ran into a professor of history whom I had met before, William Langer. Langer apparently was at that time associated with Col. William Donovan, who was then the head of the Office of the Coordinator of Information. He asked me whether I would be interested in joining the Coordinator of Information in a German-language capacity. He said that they were looking for German-born people who were American citizens. Well, I had to tell him, number one, I was not a born German but a born Austrian and, number two, that regrettably I was not yet an American citizen. He nevertheless seemed to persevere, and within a few weeks—I would say early in the year, 1942—I received a letter from the personnel office of the Coordinator

of Information asking me whether I could come down to Washington for an interview. I remember that I took the night train from Boston to Washington. I was interviewed, and apparently things went well. A few weeks later, I was told to report to Washington. That was—if my memory serves me right—later changed: I should report to New York.

I joined the COI in the spring of 1942, and my first assignment, to the best of my recollection, was not in the program department but rather in what I think was called the propaganda analysis section. My first job was to reconstruct the directive that the propaganda ministry in Berlin issued to German newspapers and radio stations. The instruction was for me to read not only the German newspapers but also the transcripts of German domestic and foreign language broadcasts. Based on what I read, I reconstructed every week the German propaganda directive and gave that directive to James Warburg, who I recall was COI's main policy officer. The German directive would read something like, “Stress to German audiences that the war is going well, that we have achieved these victories in the U-boat war and in the air, and that we are winning battles in North Africa.” Or, “Try to minimize shortages”, and so on. Warburg then used that directive to formulate the daily guidance notes to the Voice of America, and the weekly directive, which was more encompassing. As I said, that was the first job I had.Some time in 1943 I was transferred to the German-language section. My recollection is that when the German-language service was started in February 1942, there were no special broadcasts to Austria. In April 1942, however, one broadcast weekly directed at Austrian workers was instituted. The first head of the German desk was a man with the name of Hoellering.

Q: Who was an Austrian.

ROBERTS: I don't think so. I believe he was a former German. He was, I think, later succeeded by Hans Meyer.

Q: What about William Harlan Hale? Houseman lists him as the first director of the German service.

ROBERTS: I thought that Bill Hale had a position one notch higher than head of the German desk.

Q: Well, of course, Mr. Houseman's memory failed him on several counts, too.

ROBERTS: It is a fact, of course, that Bill Hale was the first broadcaster in German. His German was almost flawless. And as you know, there was at that time a very vivid debate, both within the BBC and the VOA, as to whether it was a good idea to have German-born announcers. The BBC persevered much longer in letting only Britishers speak—some of them spoke German very well, like Lindley Fraser—so that the German listener was aware that it was an Englishman who was talking to him or her and not an emigre.

Q: That was Houseman's position, he says in his book, regarding VOA, too. He wanted to use Americans who had a trace of an accent, so as not to be thought to be a "traitor."

Origin Of Title: "Voice Of America"

ROBERTS: Exactly. And on February 24, 1942, William Harlan Hale was the one who broadcast in German. At that time, nobody referred to the Voice of America yet; this was not a designation that had yet been created. It was the international broadcasting service of the Coordinator of Information.

Q: The first German show said, "We bring you voices from America."

ROBERTS: Exactly. And the words that were used were "Stimmen aus Amerika." Then later on—here my memory is not very firm—somebody suggested the designation "Voice of America," which then became permanent.

Q: The script I have of that first broadcast has four different voices on it, including Artur Schnabel's son reading a quote from Stalin. There was a man named Winter, and one named Kappel, and William Harlan Hale.

ROBERTS: To come back for a minute, you may very well be right that at the beginning Bill Hale may have been head of the German desk and Hoellering perhaps the editor in chief. As I said, I was then in another department.

Q: Bauer says Hale was never chief of the German service.

ROBERTS: Unfortunately, Bill is dead. One cannot ask him. But these things can be checked.

Creation Of Separate Austrian Service Triggered Moscow Declaration Of October 31, 1943

The most important date in terms of establishing an Austrian service was the Moscow Declaration of October 31, 1943, in which the foreign ministers of the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union declared that Austria was an occupied country that deserved to be liberated after the end of the war—"provided," et cetera and so forth.

I remember at that time there were about three or four of us who were doing Austrian material, but always under the guidance of the chief of the German section, Hans Meyer. I had the highest respect for Hans intellectually—a very good editor and writer. But Hans was an emotional person, and so were a number of other people, particularly Martin Fuchs, who was later to become the first head of the Austrian desk. He and Meyer often disagreed regarding the thrust of the broadcasts to Austria. I remember after the Moscow Declaration Martin Fuchs proposed that a separate Austrian desk be created, and indeed some time in 1944 the Austrian desk was established as a separate unit, but still within the German section. The people I remember who worked on the Austrian desk were Martin Fuchs, Robert Bauer, myself, and, on a purchase order basis, General Julius Deutsch —

Q: A general on purchase order?

ROBERTS: A general on purchase order. He had been a general of the Social Democratic para-military organization, the Schutzbund, and one of the leaders of the Social Democratic resistance in 1934 against the then authoritarian Austrian government. The Austrian government won out over the Social Democrats and he left Austria, went to Spain and became a member of the general staff of the Spanish Loyalists. After they were defeated in the Spanish Civil War, he came to the United States, I think via Paris.

I have a little anecdote. It was late May 1944, and we were all certain that there would very soon be an invasion of Western Europe, the so-called Second Front. I was a youngster at that time, in my twenties, and I reverently asked Deutsch one day, with map in hand, where he thought the Allies would land in Western Europe. He replied that I was right to ask him that question, because, after all, he had been in charge of the coastal defenses in Spain. He solemnly then ruled out one area where he was absolutely sure the Allies would not land, and that was the Normandy coast. (Laughter)

To the best of my knowledge, the original broadcast to Austrian workers was transformed in March 1943 to a broadcast aimed at all Austrian listeners. A second Austrian show was added at the time of the Moscow Declaration. We had one broadcast at 9 a.m., which was 3 o'clock in the afternoon in Austria—not a very good time—and I don't know when the other one was on the air. But I don't think we had more than 30 minutes to Austria until May 1944. I do not remember when the Austrian desk was completely separated from the German section. When Martin Fuchs left VOA and returned to Austria to join the Austrian foreign service at the behest of the then chancellor of Austria, Leopold Figl, Robert Bauer became the head of the Austrian desk and I moved up to number two.

Differences In Programming Emphasis Between German And Specifically Austrian Broadcasts

Q: Given the fact that there was this separate broadcast, and the fact that the Austrians were to be considered occupied rather than enemy listeners, clearly there had to be

distinctive differences between the approaches of the two programs, to Germany and to Austria. Tell me about those differences. Tell me what the Austrian program consisted largely of.

ROBERTS: I remember this: At the beginning, in 1942 and 1943, the Austrian broadcasts were hardly different in tone and theme from the German programs. Indeed, the news summary was always taken from the preceding German broadcasts. What distinction there was, was in terms of language; the Austrian announcers—Jens Friedrich, for instance—stressed the difference in terms of accent. But thematically, the thrust was similar to the German broadcasts—perhaps sometimes recalling the Austrian heritage, etc. What really changed the output was the Moscow Declaration.

The Austrian declaration was a document conceived in the British foreign office some time in the spring of 1943. The record shows that the British draft was forwarded to the State Department and to the Soviet foreign office some time in the summer, and with very minor recommendations it was then accepted at the Tripartite Conference in Moscow in October 1943. I mention this only because this was not an American initiative, and whatever directives we had—I always add, to the best of my recollection—made very little distinction between Germany and Austria, because before the Moscow Declaration was published, there was no policy propounded in the State Department to have Austria treated separately.

What we did, however—after the Moscow Declaration was issued—was to latch on to it, and we started writing more targeted scripts. We had a tripartite declaration which clearly indicated that after the end of the war Austria shall be an independent country. It also gave us a great deal of working room, because the Moscow Declaration said that Austrians must contribute to their liberation and that whatever Austria will do towards her own liberation will be taken into account when the final settlement is made. So it opened up a lot of possibilities, and all our intellectual acumen was brought to bear. My recollection is

that we did not get very thought-provoking directives; what we did was basically on our own initiative.

It wasn't always easy. Here I come back to our problem: We were still part of the German section, and we still had to clear our scripts with Hans Meyer and his staff, who were not all that happy, quite frankly, with a separate thrust toward an independent Austria. They didn't like the idea that we were suddenly sort of walking with higher heels in the corridors of 224 West 57th Street. I remember once a shouting match between Meyer and Bauer, when Meyer said to Bauer that the trouble was that Hitler was an Austrian. Whereupon Bauer answered that the trouble was that while in Austria Hitler was a paperhanger, as soon as he came to Germany the Germans made him Chancellor! I give you the flavor of the situation.

We started all sorts of new programs. We would, for instance, interview Bruno Walter, the famous conductor, who was a former Austrian. We would interview the film actress Hedy Lamarr—she went to school next to mine in Vienna; Hedy Kiesler was her name. I remember, for instance, the well-known writer Fritz Torberg wrote a poem about a famous Austrian soccer player, who committed suicide after the Nazis came to power in Austria in 1938; we broadcast that. We gave the broadcasts a more typical Austrian flavor, and I have no doubt—knowing my old friend, Jens Friedrich, who was a superb announcer; he had a wonderful voice that carried—that he probably stressed even more the Austrian accent after the Moscow Declaration.

So there were distinctions made and the Austrian flavor was there. There was also Konrad Maril—I don't know exactly when he joined us—who wrote some beautiful scripts with a very heavy Austrian tinge. And so it became rarer that we used German material as time went on.

Q: So how long were you in the Austrian service?

Roberts' Work With Delegations Preparing Austrian State Treaty Leads To His Transfer To State Department Austrian Desk In Early 1950

ROBERTS: I was in the Austrian service until early 1950.

Q: At which point you did what?

ROBERTS: At which point I was transferred to the State Department proper. And there again, I always say that most of my jobs occurred as a result of chance meetings in elevators or in Harvard Yard, or...

Q: You never did go back to Harvard?

ROBERTS: I never did go back to Harvard.

In 1949, the Austrian treaty talks were located in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York. These were the talks that the foreign ministers of the Big Four arranged for “deputies,” as they called them—though they were not really the deputies of the foreign ministers—to draft an Austrian state treaty. Again, you know that was the difference between Germany and Austria. In the case of Austria, it was the reestablishment of the state, and not a peace treaty. I was designated by Foy Kohler, who was then director of the Voice of America, to cover these talks for the Voice of America, not only for the Austrian desk but also for the news desk. So on the days the meetings took place, I went over to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, where Sam Reber was the American “deputy,” Gyorgy Zarubin the Soviet “deputy,” William Mallet the British “deputy,” and Marcell Berthelot the French “deputy.”

Anyway, throughout the fall of 1949, these talks took place—which of course resulted in nothing. This was the famous “Nyet” period of the Soviet Union. Very soon Sam Reber, with the concurrence of Foy Kohler, employed me also as a spokesman for the delegation. He wanted me to handle the press, who waited outside because the negotiations were closed. I was not only, as I said, a reporter but also became, for all intents and purposes,

a member of the delegation. One day Reber asked me whether I would be interested in another job, other than being a VOA reporter. I said yes, I would be. He wrote a letter to his colleague, Tommy Thompson, Llewellyn Thompson, who was then deputy assistant secretary of state for European affairs. A few days later, I got a telephone call from Tommy Thompson, asking me to come down to Washington to see him.

You know, one sometimes remembers little episodes. I recall that I walked into Tommy Thompson's office, very awed. Here was a deputy assistant secretary of state who said to me that I came highly recommended by his close friend Sam Reber. He added that if he were Dean Acheson—who was then Secretary of State—and were to show me a table of organization of the Department of State, what job would I like to have? I was stunned. After a second or so, I said that I would be very happy to serve on the Austrian desk of the State Department. He replied that he would see what he could do.

A few weeks later, Martin Herz—the Austrian desk consisted at that time of political, economic, and public affairs officers, and Martin had the public affairs job—was to be transferred to Paris. Tommy Thompson obviously must have said a nice word about me because I was asked whether I would like to have that job. I jumped at the opportunity and became a member of the Austrian desk of the State Department.

Q: In those days, VOA—indeed the whole information program—was still under the State Department.

ROBERTS: Of course it was. So it was an internal transfer. However, it wasn't easy. In September, 1945, the overseas branch of the OWI was lock, stock and barrel transferred to the State Department as the Interim Information Administration, but the personnel system was kept separate. So the transfer at that time from an information position, which moreover was located in New York, to the regular State Department personnel system presented a major problem. It looked at times as if the transfer would never take place. But

in the end, the bureaucratic problems were overcome and beginning the first of July 1950, I was a permanent member of the Austrian desk of the State Department.

Roberts Goes To Vienna And Organizes Transfer Of Information And Cultural Activities From Military High Commission (HICOG) To State Department Control

My first job was to go to Vienna and organize the transfer of all information and cultural functions of the military high commission to a normal USIS operation within a civilian high commission. USIS in Austria consisted then of more than fifty Americans and over a thousand Austrian employees—we published a daily newspaper, the Wiener Kurier, and were responsible for a three-station radio network, Red-White-Red, with stations and transmitters in Vienna, Linz and Salzburg.

August 1953: Transfers To Newly Created U.S. Information Agency As Policy Officer In Office Of European Affairs

After accomplishing this reorganization, I returned to Washington and remained on the Austrian desk till the creation of USIA in the summer of 1953. At that time, an office of European affairs under an assistant director was founded in the new USIA, and there were three positions in the area director's office: the area director, his deputy, and a program officer. I became the number three in the office of European affairs. After a year or so, Ned Nordness left the area director job and went to Rome as PAO; Bill Clark became European area director. Charlie Moffly, who was the deputy, left, and I was appointed deputy area director. I stayed in that job until 1960, when I was transferred to Yugoslavia as public affairs officer.

Change In USIA Area Office Functions From Initial Policy Only To Line Operation Responsibilities

Q: In that job, tell me about some of the problems you faced—because you were creating, in effect, a whole new operation. What were some of the highlights, what were some of the low lights, of that period?

ROBERTS: Let me start out by saying that the area director concept, as it came out of the Rockefeller commission study that created the USIA, was that it was to be a non-operating job. The area director was the director's eyes and ears as far as the area was concerned. He was the one who, in behalf of the director, would assign personnel—but through Personnel; who would create policies—but through the Office of Policy. It was a concept that was wonderful on paper but very soon everybody knew it wouldn't work. I think I was very instrumental in changing the area director concept, by giving the area directors responsibilities similar to the area assistant secretaries in the State Department, with operating functions and with desk officers—all of which we did not have. The desk officers, for instance, were all in IOP (the Office of Policy and Programs). We were only three people, with two or three secretaries. That was all there was in each of the area offices. It did not make sense.

I remember once having a discussion with Ted Streibert, who was the first director of USIA and who seemed to like me and to think highly of me. He said to me that he did not understand why I did not concentrate on policies and programs instead of spending much of your time on personnel and budget. I recall replying to him that unless we have the money and the proper people, all our bright ideas about policies and programs won't work. And that's why I was spending an inordinate amount of time trying to get the funds and the right people for the European area.

Since you asked about anecdotes, I remember an appropriations committee hearing—I think it was either 1958 or '59—chaired by Congressman Rooney, who asked how much money USIA had received the previous year for the program in France. After we gave the figure, he asked how much we were requesting for the following year, and we gave him that figure. He then picked out of his pocket a speech that General de Gaulle had made

which was not very flattering to the United States. He read large excerpts from the speech, and then sarcastically said that with all the money Congress had given USIA for France last year, the Agency couldn't prevent General de Gaulle from saying these things—why then should Congress give any amount for France again?

Q: What did you say?

ROBERTS: I was shocked. (Laughter) Rooney at that time was on a kick about how expensive transfer costs were. He would cite cases of transfers to the European area and ask for the costs. There was this great budget officer by the name of Ben Posner, who knew all the answers. Ben Posner was sitting at the other end of the table, and he would provide Rooney with the figures. And then Rooney would cite another transfer to the same city which cost considerably less. Rooney was trying to make a point: that the transfer of an officer with wife and four children was more expensive than the transfer of a single officer and that we should take that into consideration when assigning personnel.

When I went back in the car with George Allen, who was director of USIA at the time, I said to him that I had the answer to our problems. We should freeze women and children at every post, and in the post preference report an officer could say, “I would like to go to a warm climate; I would like to go to a post where French is spoken; I would like to have a blonde as my wife; and I don't want more than two children.” It would make it all very easy: the wife would already know the wife of the ambassador, she would know where the grocery shop is, where the butcher is. It would all be so much simpler, and Mr. Rooney would be happy. (Laughter)

1960: Roberts Assigned As Country PAO: Yugoslavia

Q: Let's back up a bit. You got to be area director—

ROBERTS: No. I never was. Some time early in 1959—and as I said before, it's always elevators and street corners, how one gets a job—Allen and I were in the elevator

going down at the end of the day, and he asked me where I lived. I answered, “Out Massachusetts Avenue, near Spring Valley.” He said that was where he lived and would I want a ride. I gratefully accepted. During the ride, he was telling me stories about Yugoslavia—he was Ambassador there from 1949 to '53, I think—particularly anecdotes about Marshal Tito. Then out of the blue he turned to me—and I remember this as if it were yesterday—and said that I would probably make a very good PAO in Yugoslavia. Would I like to go? I answered that of course I would like to go.

A few weeks later—Brad Connors had died a terrible death, cancer, in London where he was PAO—and Bill Clark wanted very much to replace him. And I remember having a talk with George Allen, who asked me whether I would like to go to Yugoslavia or become area director. By which time I had already made up my mind that I wanted to go to Yugoslavia, and, with heavy heart, I told him so. I was for several months Acting area director, because Joe Phillips, who was then picked by George Allen to succeed Bill Clark, took a long time leaving Bonn, where he was PAO.

Q: That was quite a choice.

ROBERTS: It was quite a choice. And in he end, I probably made the right one, for various reasons. I had an extremely interesting time in Yugoslavia. I was able to write a book about Yugoslavia which is now regarded as a classic. It is a book that has had three printings, and recently came out in a paperback edition. The quarterly sales reports show that the book continues to sell well. And I was able to meet people whom I would probably never have had the chance of meeting if I had not gone there. And so I don't regret going to Yugoslavia, though it would have been nice to have had the title of area director. But that's the way life is.

Q: During the period you were acting area director, you approached the job, I assume, as though you were in it and not just acting.

ROBERTS: Exactly. Knowing that both George Allen and Abbott Washburn, the director and the deputy director, would have given me the area director job and that I had the full support of both of them, I never felt that I was only an acting area director. I acted as if I were the area director.

Preliminary Discussion Of Events During Roberts Period As Acting Director, European Affairs Office

Q: What happened during that period?

ROBERTS: Those were interesting times, you know.

Q: You had the Soviet exhibit, for one thing.

ROBERTS: You're absolutely right. This was an era of d#tente. Nikita Khrushchev was in power. I was a member of the team that negotiated the first Soviet-American cultural agreement. I went to Moscow to see our Sokolniki Park exhibit there. I think I was one of the very first, if not the first, USIA officer who visited Moscow as a USIA officer. You see, in the fifties, we literally transferred our officers to the State Department to be assigned to Moscow. There was a secret agreement signed by the USIA director and the Secretary of State that we would do that. We had in the European area when I was deputy director there a great officer whom you perhaps ought to interview, too, if you haven't already—Pic Littell.

Q: I think he's been interviewed.

ROBERTS: Pic was the Soviet desk officer in IAE, as it was called at that time—it's EU now, I think—and he was to go to Moscow for USIA but could go only as a State Department officer. We terminated his service at the end of a pay period, and he was to have been picked up in the next pay period by the State Department. One day I got a phone call from a State Department personnel officer, who said that unfortunately they

could not hire Mr. Wallace Littell because they were at that moment under a freeze. I said that I did not want to discuss this over the telephone. I went over to the State Department, and this personnel officer of course had no idea of the secret agreement. Pic was actually without a salary because he had been terminated by USIA but not picked up by the Department. Finally the situation was corrected and Pic got his money.

What was particularly interesting in the period when I was in charge of the European area was the relationship with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which at that moment —it seemed at least—began to thaw. Things of course changed very soon thereafter again, with the Berlin Wall in '61 and then in particular '68 with the Czechoslovak invasion. But my recollection is that I spent a great deal of time on Eastern European and Soviet matters. That pleased me. You see, during that time, when I was acting area director, I went twice a week to the Foreign Service Institute to learn Serbo-Croatian. So I was Eastern European-oriented in any case, more than Central European, which perhaps was more my beat until the middle fifties. I should add here that in 1955 I was sent to Vienna to be a member of the U.S. delegation that negotiated the Austrian Treaty and I was there when the treaty was signed on May 15, 1955.

November 1960: New Yugoslav Press Law Nearly Puts USIS Out Of Business

Q: So when you went to Yugoslavia, what was the situation as you found it, and what were you able to do with it, and about it?

ROBERTS: When I came to Yugoslavia I was soon literally hit over the head, and I'll tell you why. For reasons which are still, in my mind at least, unclear, the Yugoslav government, behind our backs, issued a press law. The press law, if you read it carefully, basically put USIS out of existence. What the press law required was as follows: there was not to be any contact of American diplomatic personnel with the Yugoslav population unless authorized by the Yugoslav government. Therefore it was for instance not possible for us to distribute our bulletins through our information centers because, under the new

law, the only people who were allowed to receive Embassy bulletins were government officials.

There was a second, very important injunction. That was that those USIS activities which were directed at the population at large, i.e., libraries, exhibits, film showings, and so on, could only be run by non-diplomatic personnel. This, of course, would have put the Yugoslav local employees of USIS under enormous pressure because they would not have had the protection of the diplomatic establishment, and that's what the Yugoslavs were after.

The Yugoslav government proposed that the foreign office arrange meetings with each of the embassies in Belgrade to come to agreements as to how the press law would operate with regard to the different embassies. The British embassy, for instance, was in a much better position. As you know, the British Council is a non-governmental organization. The head of the British Council is not a member of the British embassy in Belgrade or anywhere else. So for them, this was not a problem.

Q: What about the British Information Service?

Roberts Designs “Balkan Solution” To Circumvent Press Law

ROBERTS: The British did not go very far outside the diplomatic circle; they didn't do what we did in Yugoslavia.

In any case, the only way to survive was to find some sort of what I called a Balkan solution. And the Balkan solution that I invented for us was this—and it took a long time to persuade USIA in Washington and the State Department to accept the solution. What I suggested was that we find an American, resident in Yugoslavia, who would ostensibly run the information centers. I thought the wife of the New York Times correspondent might be as good a person for that job as anybody one could find, because the Yugoslavs would

not want to put the wife of the New York Times correspondent in jail if, for instance, a book were to be borrowed that would be contrary to the views of the Yugoslav government.

I flew back to Washington—Ed Murrow was at that time director of USIA and Chester Bowles was Under Secretary of State—and I talked to both of them and persuaded them that that was a solution for which I would take the responsibility if it were not to work.

Q: There was certainly no way you could convince the Yugoslav government—

ROBERTS: The Yugoslav government, in typical fashion, told us that the press law was not directed against us but against the Soviets. Which was not the case, because the Soviets did not really suffer. The only ones that were hit by the press law was the USIS. So very early in the game, I had a difficult time there.

Q: How long did it take you to reach that solution, or get it accepted?

ROBERTS: I think the solution was finally reached in the summer of 1961. I came to Yugoslavia in August 1960; I believe the press law was issued in November. It took us six to eight months to work things out.

Q: Well, during that period were you just unable to operate? What were your people doing?

ROBERTS: First of all, we had to stop our information operations that were directed at the Yugoslav population at large. For instance, we had to stop the bulletin.

Q: Which was based on the Wireless File.

ROBERTS: Which was based on the Wireless File. It was a one-page summary of the Wireless File, very rarely going beyond two pages. It was also based very much on VOA English. We monitored that. At that time, Yugoslavia was a very tightly controlled society still. The newspapers and the radio were run by the party and the government.

Q: Ten years later you found skin magazines in all the news stands.

ROBERTS: Exactly. Even in my time—by time I left, the situation was more relaxed.

We closed the library for a time, until the agreement under the press law was signed, and then Mary Underwood was ostensibly the director of the information centers—Paul Underwood having been the New York Times correspondent there.

Q: So she was willing to take on the responsibility.

ROBERTS: She was. I told her she might have to go to jail, but she was willing.

Q: Did she actually put in full time?

ROBERTS: I told her that we'd pay her, I believe the figure was $5,000 for the use of her name, and that she need never come close to the information center because if she were to go there the Yugoslav authorities would think she was really running it. But the Yugoslavs understood our scheme completely.

You see, in Central Europe there is—or was—a position in each newspaper which was called “the responsible editor”—in Vienna, he was called “der Sitzredakteur.” (”Sitzen” is a slang expression for serving in jail.) In other words, he had to go to jail for lese majeste, for instance. In the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy, if a paper wrote something that was offensive of the monarchy, the “responsible” editor was the one who was sentenced, usually to three days in jail. He had nothing to do with the newspaper. He got a good salary, and occasionally he would have to go to jail. But that's what he was paid for. My father was an editor in Vienna, and he had on his staff a Sitzredakteur. I remember that from my youth.

Q: Did you have to live with that situation throughout your tenure?

ROBERTS: Yes. Mary Underwood left when Paul was replaced by David Binder. Her place as nominal information center director was taken by the wife of another American correspondent whose name was Peters. What happened later, to my deep regret, during the tenure of one of my successors—and I don't know which one—was that the center directors in Belgrade, Zagreb and the other Yugoslav cities where information centers were established, such as Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Titograd, and Skopje, went there without diplomatic protection. They were officers without diplomatic passport. They were sort of resident Americans. Somehow we allowed ourselves to be bamboozled by the Yugoslavs into accepting the concept of their press law: that non-diplomats run those services that are directed towards the population at large, whereas the diplomats were confined to the governmental establishment. Even today our public affairs officers in the Yugoslav republics do not have diplomatic status. They carry an ordinary American passport.

Q: Well, of course, the VOA correspondents for the last several years—

ROBERTS: The same status. I have the feeling that it's the same status as the VOA correspondents.

Q: But there is an appreciable difference between the situations.

“Pregled,” USIS Publication In Yugoslavia Takes A Bath In Danube

ROBERTS: Of course. The VOA correspondents are newsmen. This is an entirely different situation.

During my tenure in Belgrade, we had some very dicey times. For instance, we published a monthly cultural magazine called “Pregled.” We had to submit to the authorities the list of people to whom we sent the publication—not that they couldn't have found out anyway. I remember one day I met a number of Yugoslavs at a party who told me that they had not

received Pregled for a long time—people I knew to have been on the list. After I inquired further, I came to the conclusion that all of them had not received the last issue.

So I called the local employees of USIS and asked them to go down to the garage, as we called it, where we packed and labeled the mailings, to find out—to go step by step and see what happened. Well, we found out that everything had been properly addressed and properly shipped to the post office. We went to the post office, which corroborated that the shipment had been properly received. Finally I realized that something must have happened between the post office and the actual mailing. So I officially complained to the foreign office. The foreign office said that they didn't know, but that they would find out.

After two weeks, and after I had bothered the foreign office again, they still had no idea and assured me that everything was in good shape.

Then one day I got a phone call at home from the American desk officer of the foreign office, who said—I think it was a weekend—that he'd like to come over to my house, a most unusual request. As he sat down in the living room, he confessed to me that the Interior Ministry—you know, the police types—had thrown the whole batch of magazines into the Danube—all the thousands of copies.

Q: And they didn't tell anybody?

ROBERTS: They didn't tell anybody. They didn't even tell the foreign office—

Q: Was there some article in it that was of particular concern?

ROBERTS: Maybe there was. I don't remember. But I just wanted to say that those were the vagaries of running a program in Yugoslavia. Our relationship with Yugoslavia was, of course, of a different nature than our relationship with the other Eastern European countries. In Yugoslavia, we had a USIS program. In the other Eastern European countries, we did not. A great deal of credit has to go to George Allen, who as ambassador

from '49 to '53 seized the opportunity to establish a special relationship with Yugoslavia after that country had been thrown out of the Cominform in 1948. Nevertheless, there was at the head of the Yugoslav government a man called Josip Broz Tito.

He was brought up in the Communist ideology in Moscow and had a great deal of preconceived antagonism against the United States, against what he regarded as the western imperialists. And of course, whatever happened in the Yugoslav government was dictated by him. He was an autocratic ruler. So while, of course, the relationship was different from that with other Eastern European countries, basically, I always said, at that time at least, that if Tito were to be woken up at 3 o'clock in the morning and told that war had broken out between the United States and the Soviet Union, his first reaction would have been, “Those damned Americans!” It would not have been “The damned Russians,” even though it was the Soviets who deeply hurt him when they ejected him from the communist fraternity.

1963: Tito's Visit To U.S. And Subsequent Visit To American Embassy In Belgrade

In 1963, Tito came on an official visit to the United States. He was the last head of state to see John F. Kennedy alive. The last. He saw the president, I believe, at the end of October or early November 1963, as you know, Kennedy was assassinated on the 22nd of November. Tito apparently got along well with Kennedy. When there were anti-Tito demonstrations in New York just before Tito sailed back to Europe, Kennedy called him on the phone and apologized. Tito appreciated that very much.

After Kennedy was assassinated, Tito came to our embassy and signed the book of condolences—a most unusual gesture. Not only that, he wanted to talk. Now, we did not have an ambassador at that time. George Kennan had left in the summer of 1963, and Burke Elbrick didn't arrive until the spring of '64. We had a charge, Eric Kocher, and for all intents and purposes, I was the second ranking officer.

The security people of Marshal Tito came to the embassy, saying that Tito would come at a certain time in the afternoon, and that he also would like to call on the charge—whose office was on the third floor. I don't know whether you ever were in the American embassy in Belgrade, but we had there—and I was there a couple of years ago and we still have—one of the most dilapidated and antiquated elevators that you would ever find anywhere. And when the Yugoslav security people saw that elevator, they declared that they would not let Tito use it. Since he was in his seventies at that time, they wouldn't let him walk up the stairs, either. So a quick decision was made to convert my office, which was on the ground floor, to the reception office for Marshal Tito.

I have a great photograph: Marshal Tito, his foreign minister and his chef de cabinet sitting on my sofa there, with Eric Kocher and myself the receiving hosts. Tito had tears in his eyes when he talked about Kennedy. This was usually not an emotional person; this was a street fighter! He talked about Kennedy, he told us about the gift he received—I forget now what it was, but I remember that he spoke about the gift that Kennedy had given him and that he treasured it. It is my conviction, which I have shared with many people, including George Kennan, Larry Eagleburger, Brent Scowcroft and others who served in Yugoslavia, that the Tito visit was a watershed. I made that point in a talk in Belgrade in 1988 on the occasion of a Yugoslav-American symposium and nobody disagreed with my theory. From 1963 on our relations were much smoother.

Q: Including under the press law?

ROBERTS: Including under the press law. My recollection is that after 1963, the press law was no longer as rigorously enforced.

1964: Story Of Getting A Fulbright Exchange Program Established Between U.S. And Yugoslavia

Now let me talk about another agreement—the Fulbright agreement. When I left for Yugoslavia in the summer of 1960, Bob Thayer, who then headed the office of international educational and cultural relations in the State Department, told me the priority for them was the conclusion of a Fulbright agreement with Yugoslavia. However, I found nothing but rocks and closed doors and chain link fences. The Yugoslavs wanted a Fulbright agreement, but on their terms. They were to select the people who would obtain grants. They didn't want American interference. They wanted the money, all right, but they didn't want to abide by the regulations under which all other Fulbright agreements operated. When I came on home leave in 1963 I had to report that I had totally failed to budge the Yugoslav authorities. But after Tito's visit to the U.S., I was told informally by the foreign office that they had received instructions to conclude a Fulbright agreement as fast as possible. By the summer of 1964, we had a Fulbright agreement, and it was signed in early November in the presence of Senator Fulbright, who came to Yugoslavia for the signing ceremony. He still talks to me about it as one of the great things that happened—that Yugoslavia and the U.S. concluded a Fulbright agreement, thinking that I accomplished it, whereas in all fairness while I had tried very hard I didn't succeed until after Tito's visit to the United States.

Q: You don't mean that Kennedy himself raised this issue with Tito? Or was it a matter of atmosphere?

ROBERTS: My hunch is—and a member of the foreign office at that time more or less confirmed this to me only very recently when he was here in Washington—that when Tito came back from the United States, and particularly after Kennedy was assassinated, he probably asked whether there was an outstanding matter in our relationship with the United States. Where could Yugoslavia do something to further the relationship? And probably someone replied that there was this Fulbright agreement which had been in negotiation for three years. And Tito probably said, “Let's see whether we can't conclude that agreement.”

I don't want to imply that even then the negotiations were easy. I give a great deal of credit to my associate, Harold Engle, who was the cultural affairs officer, for his perseverance, his stubbornness, and his wisdom in getting the agreement concluded. I remember having to talk to the minister of culture, the minister of information and the number two man in the foreign office on repeated occasions during the negotiations to find common ground.

Q: How long did it take?

ROBERTS: I would say six months. But we got a very good agreement—the first Fulbright agreement with a communist country. Recently we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Fulbright agreement and both sides—I spoke on behalf of the U.S.—expressed their satisfaction and pointed with pride to the large number of exchanges since 1964.

Q: How difficult was it serving, in effect, two masters—USIA on the one hand and CU in the State Department on the other, while you were in the field?

ROBERTS: I never found it to be a problem.

Q: So your two chief achievements in your days in Yugoslavia were the Balkan solution to the press law and the Fulbright agreement?

ROBERTS: Yes, I would say that. And I think I also was successful in having USIS play a major role in the Embassy. I was able to establish a close relationship with three ambassadors in the six years I was there, all of whom included me in every important matter.

At first I served under Karl Rankin, a very nice foreign service officer who had served in Yugoslavia before the war. So he knew Yugoslavia. As a matter of fact, Karl Rankin was the last American to leave the legation—it was not an embassy at that time—in May 1941 after the Germans had overrun Yugoslavia.

The Yugoslavs didn't think very highly of him because he had been, in his previous assignment, ambassador to Chiang Kai-shek's China, and he seemed to have had a close relationship with Chiang Kai-shek. When official Yugoslavs were invited to the residence they saw these photos, which to them was a red flag, to coin a phrase, because in their view the Chiang government was a reactionary government. After all, Mao Zedong was the one whose government the Yugoslavs recognized.

The next ambassador was George Kennan, who served from '61 to '63. That was, of course, a great experience, to work with Kennan, and we became close personal friends, and still are.

Then in 1964, Burke Elbrick came. Burke had been an old friend from the days when I was deputy area director and he was assistant secretary of state for European affairs. At that time we had a weekly meeting—an arrangement that Bill Clark started in 1954. The area director and his deputy and the assistant secretary and his deputy would meet every Thursday at 5 o'clock in the State Department, as Bill Clark once said, “to discuss problems before they become problems.” So when Elbrick arrived in Belgrade, he found his old friend Walter Roberts serving as PAO. Even though I had at that time been in Yugoslavia for almost four years—a long tour of duty for Yugoslavia in that period—Elbrick didn't want to let me go. I stayed on until it was really time to leave in '66.

Averell Harriman's 1965 Visit Seeking Tito's Acceptance Of Role As Mediator On Vietnam

One little anecdote. In 1965, Harriman—Governor Averell Harriman—came on behalf of President Lyndon Johnson to Yugoslavia, to try to persuade Marshal Tito to play an intermediary role between the United States and North Vietnam. Despite the fact that U.S. relations with Marshal Tito had enormously improved, this was a highly dubious undertaking since Vietnam was the sore point in our relationship. Tito was deeply unhappy with our role in Vietnam—he said so all the time—and he was, I think, upset that Lyndon Johnson put him, as it were, on the spot, sending as high level a figure as Harriman to

Yugoslavia. He knew very well—he had heard from his ambassador in Washington—that what Lyndon Johnson was after was an intermediary role.

The meeting took place on the island of Brioni, where Tito had his residence. Tito was clearly in a bad mood. He opened the meeting by telling Harriman that the trouble with America was that it always supported the wrong people. Harriman, adjusting his hearing aid, inquired what Tito meant by that. Tito replied by naming Chiang Kai-shek, Syngman Rhee...Whereupon Harriman interrupted and said, “And Marshal Tito?!” Tito got all red in the face. He hadn't expected that answer from Harriman. But things soon calmed down. Tito, of course, didn't give an inch. It was very clear that this wasn't going to be a productive meeting.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Tito turned to Harriman and asked how old he was. And Harriman said, “Seventy-three.” So am I, Tito said, and got up and walked out. Here we were, not knowing what had happened. We asked Tito's chef de cabinet whether the meeting was over. He said he didn't know, and suggested that we should wait a few moments. A couple of minutes later, Tito came back with a dusty old bottle of wine. It came from a former Austrian part of Yugoslavia, from Marburg, which is now Maribor, and well-known wine country; the date was 1892. Tito opened the bottle, and everyone was served. The interesting part is that while Tito and Harriman were of the same age in the summer of 1965, they were not born in the same year; Harriman was half a year older. He was born in November 1891 while Tito was born in May 1892. In any case, it was a 73-year-old bottle, which Tito offered to drink with Harriman.

Q: How did it taste?

ROBERTS: It was a very heavy wine. In some respects it tasted more like cognac.
The meeting ended on a good note. Everybody was a little bit high. There was the air attach#'s plane, a DC-3, that took us from Brioni, from the Pula airport, down to Dubrovnik, where Mrs. Elbrick, Mrs. Harriman, my wife and the air attach#'s wife were waiting in the

Argentina Hotel. Suddenly, Elbrick, the perfect foreign service officer, turned to Harriman and suggested that a telegram be sent to President Johnson about the meeting. Harriman asked Elbrick to draft it and Elbrick in turn asked me. And this was the only time in my life when I drafted a telegram to the President of the United States. (Laughter)

Q: So when you left Yugoslavia, what was the next job?

Assignments As Diplomat-In-Residence At Brown University (1966-67) And Geneva (1967) As Public Affairs Adviser To U.S. Ambassador At UN, Geneva

ROBERTS: When I left Yugoslavia I went for one year as diplomat-in-residence to Brown University, which was a very good year for me. First of all, I learned to do the things that I do now: I taught a course there, and I learned how to teach. Secondly, it gave me the opportunity to do the basic research on my book on Yugoslavia, which was published a few years later, I got to know America again. I got to know New England, and particularly Rhode Island, where I still consider myself to be half at home. I reacquainted myself with Senator Pell, whom I had known in the early fifties when we both served in the State Department. Then I was assigned to Geneva in '67 for two years as public affairs adviser to the American ambassador at the European headquarters of the UN.

Q: What were some of the interesting developments there?

ROBERTS: I learned at that time something very basic: that one cannot be a good spokesman unless one is an integral part of the policy making process. And since we in USIA are not an integral part of the policy making process, we are only very rarely in a position to be good spokesmen.

For instance, I'm told, our present director of information in New York at the United Nations, Phil Arnold, is included in every meeting Ambassador Pickering has. Even in the morning staff meeting, where only three or four people meet, he is included. In such a situation, the USIA officer can do a good job.

I found the job in Geneva very frustrating. There were, in my time, many important bilateral and multilateral conferences, ranging from disarmament to GATT. Most of the U.S. delegations came from Washington with their own public affairs officers, which was the right thing to do because they were in a far better position to explain policy than we who were not in at the policy formulation process. On the other hand, what was then our role? Some delegations relied on us for press relations, but they worked only when the delegation heads included USIS in their staff deliberations, which was not always the case. In these circumstances I did not enjoy the assignment, and after a while made it known that I would like to be transferred as soon as my tour was completed.

Roberts Appointed Deputy Associate Director USIA For Research And Assessment, 1969; Later Becomes Associate Director

After Nixon was elected president Frank Shakespeare was appointed USIA director and Henry Loomis became deputy director. Soon after his appointment, Loomis called me in Geneva and said he wanted me on his team in Washington. And so I became deputy associate director for what was called research and assessment at that time.

Q: Which was Henry Loomis's old job in the mid-fifties.

ROBERTS: Correct. And this was widened, because it included the inspection corps and an evaluation unit. It was, of course, given to a political appointee, and I was the political appointee's deputy. Bill Strasburg was associate director for one year.

Q: I don't remember him at all.

ROBERTS: Very few people remember him. A fine fellow, who left after a year. Frank Shakespeare told me at the time Strasburg left that I should not assume that I would be appointed associate director, and that he had that job in mind for a political appointee. Henry Loomis told me that Frank Shakespeare was deadly opposed to any career officer

getting that job, because there was at that time only one associate director in the agency. Now there are four, but then there was only one.

The basic function of the position as it was then set up was that of a chief evaluator, who had at his disposal research and inspection—the research staff was on Strasburg's staff, as was the inspection corps and an evaluation unit. Anyway, to make a long story short, I was sure that I was not going to get the job when one day, after having been in an acting capacity for almost a year, I arrived at the airport in Vienna. John Mowinckel, who was an old USIA colleague of mine from the European area days and who was then DCM—deputy chief of mission—in Vienna, came with a big grin to the airport to pick me up, and, carrying a copy of the Wireless File, said, “Congratulations.” I asked, “For what?” And he said, “You have just been appointed associate director of USIA.”

I was incredulous, because Shakespeare had told me that I wouldn't get the job. And to this day, Cliff, I do not know how this appointment came about. But I found myself in the senior career position of USIA. The three officers who outranked me—Shakespeare, Loomis, Towery—were all political appointees. One of the interesting by-products of my new position was that I was included in the daily CIA briefings. Every morning, a lady came over from the CIA to brief the director and the two deputy directors—

Q: And the associate director.

ROBERTS: And the associate director.

Q: Did she brief you individually or all together?

ROBERTS: Individually. She had a document, and she didn't leave my room until I read and gave it back to her, signing my name that I had seen it. One day the operations center called and said that as of a certain time I was acting director of USIA because Shakespeare, Loomis and Towery were out of town. I was the fourth-ranking officer at that time.

Q: Tell me about the job. Tell me how you approached it.

ROBERTS: It wasn't easy, because we had to tread a very difficult road. Here we were in a position to tell area directors and media directors how they were performing and occasionally that they were not doing their jobs so well. Hopefully, of course, you could tell them they were doing their jobs well. The person who really looked to me for advice was Henry Loomis, the deputy director.

Q: Who was really running the agency.

ROBERTS: Who was the chief operating officer. My relationship with Shakespeare was almost always through Loomis. Loomis would ask whether we should do this or that, and what kind of data did we have. Unfortunately, we had neither the money nor the manpower always to provide firm data.

Q: We never had enough research.

ROBERTS: We never had enough research. And to this day I don't think we have enough. We engaged in media research and public opinion research. As to the latter, we, of course, did not conduct public opinion polls ourselves but contracted with reputable organizations which were engaged in public opinion research.

Friction Between Media/Area Affairs and Research Officer

This was not an easy job. It was a fun job to have, but only because Loomis was there. Henry and I got along very well. We enjoyed each other's company, and when he left, he was replaced by someone whom I had known well, and that was Gene Kopp—who is back again, in the same job. So at the time I was associate director I had the good fortune of dealing with two people—Loomis and Kopp—whom I liked and respected, and who I hope liked and respected me.

But there was a certain amount of sniping by the media and by the areas, not against me personally, but against a position that would tell them, on the basis of data, and perhaps on the basis of personal opinion, that they may be pursuing the wrong course.

Q: What form did this sniping take?

ROBERTS: Well, for instance, at one point the area directors got together and said that IOR, as it was called, should not be allowed to have direct access to the deputy director but should, rather, go through the area directors if it concerned the areas. They didn't want us to send memoranda to Loomis unless we cleared it with them.

During my tenure as associate director, I was asked whether I wanted to go to Rome as PAO—a job that I would have liked a few years earlier. To decline that job was a very difficult decision for me. One of the reasons was—and it weighed heavily in my decision—the age of my children. They were too old to come with us, and I did not want to leave them here and go to Rome. Two of them were at that time about to go to college, and one was already in college, and I didn't want to be too far away from them.

Roberts Offered Position With Center For Strategic International Studies, Accepts And Retires

A few months later, the Center for Strategic and International Studies approached me and asked me whether I would be interested in a position as director of diplomatic studies. After careful consideration, I decided to accept. I remember a long discussion with Jim Keogh, who was then director of USIA. He was very kind. He said that he wanted me to stay, that he knew Ken Rush very well—who was then Under Secretary of State—and that he thought he could get me an ambassadorship. I replied that I knew how this works, that I appreciated his kindness but even if he succeeded I would be ambassador to Mali or to Guinea. The ambassadorships that would be of interest would not come my way.

Q: CSIS was a wonderful alternative.

ROBERTS: And financially it was also not a bad deal, because I had a good retirement pay and a good salary at CSIS. Why was CSIS interested in me? Not because I was so brilliant or because I was a nice guy. At that time, the advisory commission on information and the advisory commission on cultural affairs had come to CSIS and asked that a study be made, under CSIS auspices, on the future of the information and cultural program. They both agreed to invite Frank Stanton, the just-retired president of CBS and former chairman of the USIA advisory commission, to chair a panel.

I had not known Frank well. I had been present perhaps two or three times in meetings with him. Once I appeared before the advisory commission when Frank was its chairman. I made a presentation at one of the PAO meetings—I think it was in Rome—which Stanton attended. I'm told that Frank Stanton told David Abshire, the head of CSIS, that he would accept the chairmanship of that panel only if he could select his own executive director. He said that he had a man in mind, but did not know whether he would be available—Walter Roberts. So Abshire called me, and asked me to go to lunch with him.

Q: Had you known Abshire before?

ROBERTS: I had met him once, through Charlie Ablard, who was at one point general counsel of USIA and a neighbor of Abshire's in Alexandria. At lunch, he asked me whether I would like to join CSIS. He told me what he wanted me to do at CSIS even after the information panel was completed. Basically, Stan Burnett now has the job in CSIS that I had at the time. After some reflection I decided that that was a very interesting new career, and I retired from USIA on April first, 1974.

Q: Of course, the report of the so-called Stanton Commission was the subject of a great deal of controversy within the Agency—

ROBERTS: A great deal of controversy, Cliff, but I would say this to you. I have no doubt that the basic concepts of the Stanton Report will be implemented one day. There are quite a few people, including friends of mine in the foreign service, who were unhappy with me after the Stanton panel report was issued and who —now that they're retired and no longer in the service—admit that we were right. Including some good friends of yours.

Q: Thank you very much, Walter.

ROBERTS: Thank YOU.

End of interview